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ABSTRACT

As part of an effort to encourage parents to help their children in school, this home learning guide, which can also be obtained in taped versions, provides parents with learning activities with which to engage children at home. Based on research findings, the activities are divided into the following categories: curriculum of the home, reading to children, independent reading, counting, early writing, speaking and listening, developing talent, and ideals. (HOD)

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WHAT WORKS AT HOME

The University of Texas at Austin

FOREWARD: A MESSAGE FROM WILLIAM J. BENNETT, SECRETARY, UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

When I was sworn into office as Secretary of Education, one of the first promises I made to myself, and to the American public, was that I would always talk sense to the American people and that we would bring to them the very best information available, in a practical, usable form. The publication of the report What Works was an important step in fulfilling that promise. The response to this report has been deeply gratifying -- especially the strong support within the families of our nation. I am more convinced every day that the American people are ready, willing, and able to join with educators to improve their schools and to assist their children in learning.

Because of this I am delighted that the University of Texas at Austin is making the Home Learning section of "What Works," supplemented by effective, common sense activities, available on audio cassette in both English and Spanish. It is just this kind of cooperation between government, academia, and individuals which can produce the improvement we all desire.

The message I want most to share with the American public is this -- you can make a difference. You can make a difference in the education and future of your children.

What Works At Home

Research Findings and Learning Activities:

Common Sense and Fun for Adults and Children

The "Research Findings" and accompanying comments in What Works at Home were taken from the U.S. Department of Education's publication What Works.

Exercises and Illustrations

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CURRICULUM OF THE HOME

Research Finding:

Parents are their children's first and most influential teachers. What parents do to help their children learn is more important to academic success than how well-off the family is.

Parents can do many things at home to help their children succeed in school. Unfortunately, recent evidence indicates that many parents are doing much less than they might. For example, American mothers on average spend less than half an hour a day talking, explaining, or reading with their children. Fathers spend less than 15 minutes.

They can create a "curriculum of the home" that teaches their children what matters. They do this through their daily conversations, household routines, attention to school matters, and affectionate concern for their children's progress.

Conversation is important. Children learn to read, reason, and understand things better when their parents:

- read, talk, and listen to them,
- tell them stories, play games, share hobbies, and
- discuss news, TV programs, and special events.

In order to enrich the "curriculum of the home," some parents:

- provide books, supplies, and a special place for studying,
- observe routine for meals, bedtime, and homework, and
- monitor the amount of time spent watching TV and doing after-school jobs.

Parents stay aware of their children's lives at school when they:

- discuss school events,
- help children meet deadlines, and
- talk with their children about school problems and successes.

Research on both gifted and disadvantaged children shows that home efforts can greatly improve student achievement. For example, when parents of disadvantaged children take the steps listed above, their children can do as well at school as the children of more affluent families.1

Exercises:

1. Plan time to talk and listen to each child. Combine this with chores and activities: take walks, exercise, dry dishes, wash the car, do yardwork. Let grandparents and older brothers and sisters help. Plan special reports: "Remember everything your teacher wears tomorrow so you can draw me a picture." "Let's trade memories of what we think about at lunch."

2. Plan family conversation at mealtime.
   A. Watch television for 10 minutes, then turn off the set and discuss what you saw.
   B. Take turns telling something you learned: the price of tires, a neighbor's name, how to add fractions.

3. Treat school, homework, and activities like important jobs your child is doing. Let your child hear you tell others how much you admire her teacher, her work, her school, her friends.

READING TO CHILDREN

Research Finding:

The best way for parents to help their children become better readers is to read to them -- even when they are very young. Children benefit most from reading aloud when they discuss stories, learn to identify letters and words, and talk about the meaning of words.

The specific skills required for reading come from direct experience with written language. At home, as in school, the more reading the better.

Parents can encourage their children's reading in many ways. Some tutor informally by pointing out letters and words on signs and containers. Others use more formal tools, such as workbooks. But children whose parents simply read to them perform as well as those whose parents use workbooks or have had training in teaching.

The conversation that goes with reading aloud to children is as important as the reading itself. When parents ask children only superficial questions about stories, or don't discuss the stories at all, their children do not achieve as well in reading as the children of parents who ask questions that require thinking and who relate the stories to everyday events. Kindergarten children who know a lot about written language usually have parents who believe that reading is important and who seize every opportunity to act on that conviction by reading to their children.2

Exercises:

1. Play alphabet games with your children. You can adapt them to suit different ages.
   A. Before you go shopping, select a letter and see how many words you can find that begin with it. Look at signs, packages, advertisements, whatever you see. (This can help counting, too.)

2. Encourage older children to read to younger ones (both benefit). Then let them trade and have the younger one read to the older one. Listen to them and let them know how proud you are of their reading progress and their helpful attitude. Ask "real" questions about the things they read: "Why do you think the mother was happy?" "Would you like it if cats could talk?" "What should he have done when he found he was lost?"

3. If you are too busy to read to your children or don't feel comfortable reading English, have your children read to you. Say, for example, "Read your book out loud to me while I fix supper or iron or fix the broken chair. It will make the work go faster." Ask questions and really listen to the answers.

4. Let your child share "grown up reading." Let him sit on your lap while you look at a newspaper or magazine. Point out an occasional word or picture. This will identify reading as something you value and associate it with good moments with you.

5. Use TV wisely. Children's programs on PBS often feature words, phrases, and stories. Help your child use these and look for them in other places. Watch a commercial for a popular product. Have your child find an advertisement for the same product in a magazine or on a billboard.

INDEPENDENT READING

Research Finding:

Children improve their reading ability by reading a lot. Reading achievement is directly related to the amount of reading children do in school and outside.

Independent reading increases both vocabulary and reading fluency. Unlike using workbooks and performing computer drills, reading books gives children practice in the "whole act" of reading, that is, both in discovering the meanings of individual words and in grasping the meaning of an entire story. But American children do not spend much time reading independently at school or at home. In the average elementary school, for example, children spend just 7 to 8 minutes a day reading silently. At home, half of all fifth graders spend only 4 minutes a day reading. These same children spend an average of 130 minutes a day watching television.

Research shows that the amount of leisure time spent reading is directly related to children's reading comprehension, the size of their vocabularies, and the gains in their reading ability. Clearly, reading at home can be a powerful supplement to classwork. Parents can encourage leisure reading by making books an important part of the home, by giving books or magazines as presents, and by encouraging visits to the local library.

Another key to promoting independent reading is making books easily available to children through classroom libraries. Children in classrooms that have libraries read more, have better attitudes about reading, and make greater gains in reading comprehension than children in classrooms without libraries.3

Exercises:

1. Keep showing your children how important reading is in everyday life. Let them see you use written directions for cooking, using and fixing appliances, or reading maps.

2. Get children interested in newspapers and magazines early. Help them find different sections that might interest them: comics, sports, movie ads. Don't overlook the classifieds for sales on items that interest them (cars, bikes, musical instruments) and for funny messages in the "Personals" column. When you look at the newspaper, sometimes let small children sit on your lap and point out letters and words.

3. Remember that there are lots of ways to acquire books and magazines inexpensively. Libraries are best, but don't forget garage sales, free pamphlets in stores. Watch for sales at used book stores and buy books and magazines for special treats.

4. Once in a while let reading, and then telling you about what was read, be a way of earning a privilege: a small treat, an excuse from doing a disliked chore, a way of avoiding punishment for doing something wrong.

5. Put older children in charge of getting needed information for the family. They could read about movies to help select one for a family outing, could read about locations for a family vacation, could read a magazine like Consumer Reports to find out about a radio (or some other product) the family is thinking of purchasing. They could read ads for garage sales to look for a special family need.

COUNTING

Research Finding:

A good way to teach children simple arithmetic is to build on their informal knowledge. This is why learning to count everyday objects is an effective basis for early arithmetic lessons.

Young children are comfortable with numbers; "math anxiety" comes in later years. Just watching the enjoyment children get from songs and nursery rhymes that involve counting is ample evidence of their natural ease. These early counting activities can set the stage for later, more formal exposure to arithmetic.

But counting is not limited to merely reciting strings of numbers. It also includes matching numbers to objects and reaching totals (for example, counting the number of apples sitting on a table). Children learn to do arithmetic by first mastering different counting strategies, beginning with rote counting (1,2,3,4), and progressing to memorized computations (2X2=4). As children learn the facts of arithmetic, they also learn to combine those facts by using more sophisticated strategies. As their skills grow, they rely less and less on counting.

When teachers begin by using children's informal knowledge, then proceed to more complex operations, children learn more readily and enjoy it.4

Exercises:

1. When you do things with young children, form the habit of counting. Count everything. Count the stairs you climb; count the steps from the door to the street; count the white dogs you see; count the black cars. Once you start, your children will think of lots of things to count.

2. Board games and games with cards or dice give lots of chances to count and work with numbers. Games with play money are especially good. These can be very inexpensive at garage sales, can keep children busy and quiet, and can provide an activity that the whole family can enjoy.

3. Shopping trips are great for learning to work with numbers. Ask a child to pick out four apples. Read the prices on items as you go through the store. As children grow older, they can really think about prices, budgets, making change. Say, "This can of tomatoes costs 69 cents. Could we buy it with three quarters? How much money would we get back?"

4. Have children cut coupons out of newspapers and magazines. Let them keep track of how much money is saved by using them.

5. When one child is trying to learn the multiplication tables, let the whole family help. Take turns giving problems at the dinner table: What is 5 x 6? What is 3 x 8? (The review will help everyone).

6. Create "practical" problems for children to solve. "There will be six children at the party and we want three cookies for each one. How many cookies should we buy?" "If you get $1.50 per hour for babysitting, how much will you be paid for 3 1/2 hours?"

EARLY WRITING

Research Finding:

Children who are encouraged to draw and scribble "stories" at an early age will later learn to compose more easily, more effectively, and with greater confidence than children who do not have this encouragement.

Even toddlers, who can hardly hold a crayon or pencil, are eager to "write" long before they acquire the skills in kindergarten that formally prepare them to read and write.

Studies of very young children show that their carefully formed scrawls have meaning to them, and that this writing actually helps them develop language skills. Research suggests that the best way to help children at this stage of their development as writers is to respond to the ideas they are trying to express.

Very young children take the first steps toward writing by drawing and scribbling or, if they cannot use a pencil, they may use plastic or metal letters on a felt or magnetic board. Some preschoolers may write on toy typewriters; others may dictate stories into a tape recorder or to an adult, who writes them down and reads them back. For this reason, it is best to focus on the intended meaning of what very young children write, rather than on the appearance of the writing.

Children become more effective writers when parents and teachers encourage them to choose the topics they write about, then leave them alone to exercise their own creativity. The industriousness of such children has prompted one researcher to comment that they "violate the child labor laws."5

Exercises:

1. Most children find it exciting to get something in the mail, to write and receive letters. Give them the junk mail you receive. Encourage relatives to write to your children occasionally; let the children write back, even if it's just a scribble. Send your child an occasional card from a "secret friend" urging him to work hard at school.

2. Always treat blank pieces of paper and pencils, pens, or crayons as something especially wonderful. "This is yours and you can put anything you want on it." Take a moment to write or draw something yourself. Always treat writing like something that matters.

3. Decide on a family message center -- the front of the refrigerator, the back of a door. Play "note tag." Anyone who gets a message must put up a note for someone else. If Joe finds a note that says "Feed the cat," he might write a note that says "I did. I want some gum."

4. When you are going to the grocery store or super market, select a word to look for. You can find a word in a grocery advertisement in the newspaper or a magazine. You could try these: sugar, salt, real, natural, vitamin, green. Have your child write the word down to take with you. See who can find the word written the most times on labels, packages, signs. (This game will help reading and counting, too.)

SPEAKING AND LISTENING

Research Finding:

A good foundation in speaking and listening helps children become better readers.

When children learn to read, they are making a transition from spoken to written language. Reading instruction builds on conversational skills: the better children are at using spoken language, the more successfully they will learn to read written language. To succeed at reading, children need a basic vocabulary, some knowledge of the world around them, and the ability to talk about what they know. These skills enable children to understand written material more readily.

Research shows a strong connection between reading and listening. A child who is listening well shows it by being able to retell stories and repeat instructions. Children who are good listeners in kindergarten and first grade are likely to become successful readers by the third grade. Good fifth-grade listeners are likely to do well on aptitude and achievement tests in high school.

Parents and teachers need to engage children in thoughtful discussions on all subjects -- current events, nature, sports, hobbies, machines, family life, and emotions -- in short, on anything that interests children. Such discussions should not be limited to reading selections that are part of classwork.

Conversing with children about the world around them will help them reflect on past experiences and on what they will see, do, and read about in the future.

Speaking English at school is especially important for children who have not grown up speaking English.6

Exercises:

1. If you have a tape recorder, have your children form the habit from early grades on of recording themselves reading aloud any papers they write. If they look at their papers while listening to their recording, they are more likely to catch errors and to recognize awkward sentences.

2. In many cities there are numbers you can dial to hear prayers, jokes, time and temperature, etc. Toddlers can improve their habits of listening, and sometimes learn some words, by listening to these.

3. Too much television can interfere with learning, but there are excellent children's programs on PBS and other educational channels or networks. Let your children spend their television time on these.

4. If your children are learning English (or Spanish, French, Latin, German, etc.) at school, have them become teachers for their family at home. Really listen and work to learn the materials they bring home. Let them know they are helping the family. If you have a tape recorder, use it to check everyone's progress with pronunciation and accent.

5. Elect your child "family messenger" and explain that the job is very important. Start with simple things like telling grandma "dinner is ready" and progress to taking telephone messages.

DEVELOPING TALENT

Research Finding:

Many highly successful individuals have above-average but not extraordinary intelligence. Accomplishment in a particular activity is often more dependent upon hard work and self-discipline than on innate ability.

High academic achievers are not necessarily born "smarter" than others, nor do people born with extraordinary abilities necessarily become highly accomplished individuals. Parents, teachers, coaches, and the individuals themselves can influence how much a mind or talent develops by fostering self-discipline and encouraging hard work. Most highly successful individuals have above-average but not exceptional intelligence. A high IQ seems less important than specializing in one area of endeavor, persevering, and developing the social skills required to lead and get along well with others.

Studies of accomplished musicians, athletes, and historical figures show that when they were children, they were competent, had good social and communication skills, and showed versatility as well as perseverance in practicing their skill over long periods. Most got along well with their peers and parents. They constantly nurtured their skills. And their efforts paid off.

Developing talent takes effort and concentration. These, as much as nature, are the foundation for success.7

Exercises:

1. Encourage your children to try many different activities. Urge them to take part in school clubs, in music, art, sports, etc. If they are in programs, make sure that as many family members as possible go and watch -- even if you don't know the other people or understand the activity. Ask your child's teacher or counselor about free summer programs in your community.

2. Find role models for your children. Not just famous people, but successful students a few years older. Encourage them to imitate or follow the path of those both you and they admire.

3. Be positive rather than negative. If your child says "I want to be a movie star," don't say "You couldn't do that; you're poor and ugly and dumb." Say, "Why don't you give the drama club a try and see how it goes. The only rule is that you have to give it a good try."

4. The practice necessary to master any skill can be lonely, frustrating, and boring. This is where your child most needs your support and company. Ask the child learning a musical instrument to practice so you can listen while you do your work. If your child is learning a sport, take a watch and time her when she runs; catch for him while he practices pitching.

5. Never pass up the opportunity to mention someone who has succeeded because of hard work and effort. Point out, wherever possible, that your child has always reminded you of this hardworking, disciplined "star." Let everyone know that you are convinced that your child was born with the character and discipline to succeed no matter what the odds.

IDEALS

Research Finding:

Belief in the value of hard work, the importance of personal responsibility, and the importance of education itself contributes to greater success in school.

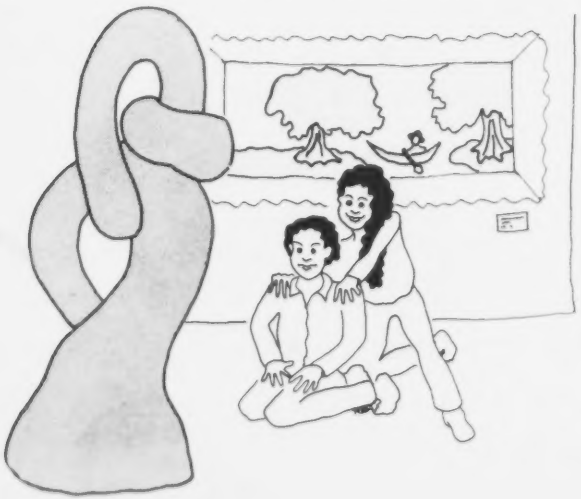
The ideals that children hold have important implications for their school experiences. Children who believe in the value of hard work and responsibility and who attach importance to education are likely to have higher academic achievement and fewer disciplinary problems than those who do not have these ideals. They are also less likely to drop out of school. Such children are more likely to use their out-of-school time in ways that reinforce learning. For example, high school students who believe in hard work, responsibility, and the value of education spend about 3 more hours a week on homework than do other students. This is a significant difference since the average student spends only about 5 hours a week doing homework.

Parents can improve their children's chances for success by emphasizing the importance of education, hard work, and responsibility, and by encouraging their children's friendships with peers who have similar values. The ideals that students, their parents, and their peers hold are more important than a student's socioeconomic and ethnic background in predicting academic success.8

Exercises:

1. From the time your children are toddlers, let them know that you consider it a sure thing that they will get a good education. Never say, "I wish you would finish high school," or "I wish we were rich so you could get an education." Say, "After you graduate from high school . . ." or "When you have your degree." Let your child hear you tell other people, "Of course, she'll get a good education."

2. Let your children know that you trust them to work hard and achieve high goals. Make them feel special. Say, "From the time you were a baby, I could see you were different. You always worked till you got what you wanted, no matter how hard it was. Nothing discouraged you."



3. Show by the way you act and by your comments about other people that you consider hard work, responsibility, and self-discipline absolutely essential. Praise your child every time you see evidence of these qualities.

4. Take your children to see exhibitions of what people can achieve. There are many free or inexpensive art exhibits, museums, music recitals, sports activities. Ask for suggestions at the school, at your church, at your city library. Don't worry if it means leaving your house messy or if people will think you don't know what you're doing. Go.

5. Always remind your children that most of the things we admire were achieved by someone's hard work. Every building, road, book, medicine, appliance, whatever, was designed and produced by human beings -- people who once were as young and knew as little as your child.

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(if applicable)

Total_____

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ORDER FORM

SEND TO: Special Projects
Extension Instruction & Materials Center
The University of Texas at Austin
P.O. Box 7700
Austin, Texas 78713-7700

BILL TO:

Organization:_____
Name:_____
Title:_____
Address:_____
City:_____
State/Zip:_____
Telephone:_____

SHIP TO:

Organization:_____
Name:_____
Title:_____
Address:_____
City:_____
State/Zip:_____
Telephone:_____

METHOD OF PAYMENT

Purchase Order #_____
_____Check Enclosed
_____Money Order Enclosed

METHOD OF DELIVERY

_____U.S. Mail (paid by UT)

_____C.O.D.*

*** PLEASE NOTE: WE CANNOT COMPLETE DELIVERY TO POST OFFICE ADDRESSES WITH C.O.D. ALL C.O.D. SHIPPING ADDRESSES MUST CONTAIN THE STREET NUMBER OR A PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION OF THE LOCATION.**

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